

UPDATE: Spontaneous return of Congolese refugees from Angola to DRC

11 September 2019



Since 18 August, thousands of Congolese refugees **spontaneously left Lóvuá refugee settlement** in Angola to make their way back home in the DRC.

A **Tripartite Meeting** subsequently took place on 22 and 23 August between UNHCR and the Governments of Angola and DRC, where it was decided that **facilitated repatriation** would start on 16 September 2019.

Background

Back in 2017, the outbreak of violence in the Kasai region of DRC triggered the displacement of some 1.4 million people and the flight of over 35,000 refugees to Lunda Norte Province, Angola.

Spontaneous returns from northeastern Angola are linked to the presidential elections and follow recent discussions between visiting DRC officials and refugees, where refugees were briefed about improvements in the security situation in Kasai Provinces. Some refugees subsequently approached UNHCR, expressing their wish to return to DRC. UNHCR and partners conducted “intentions surveys” in May, showing that 85% of the refugees in Lóvuá Settlement were willing to return to DRC. On 23 August, UNHCR engaged in tripartite discussions with Angola and DRC to put in place mechanisms for voluntary, dignified and sustainable returns. It was agreed to launch the voluntary repatriation operation on 16 September. However, unwilling to wait until the beginning of the organized returns, over eight thousand Congolese refugees started walking from Lóvuá settlement towards the DRC border.



Current situation

Many of the spontaneous returnees were transported in trucks provided by the Government of Angola. Their final destinations are still uncertain, but most of them claim they want to go to Kananga or other larger cities and do not want to go back to their places of origin in Kasai, as villages have been destroyed and many Kasaians still dread discrimination based on ethnicity.

As of 3 September and according to DRC immigration authorities (DGM), about **14,245 people¹** arrived in **Kalamba Mbuji**, a border entry point in DRC’s Kasai Central Province. Most of them are staying in improvised shelters at the border.

Currently, the returnees in Kananga are staying around the church Notre Dame in an unfinished building. The current site is overcrowded and becoming more so, posing protection and public health risks. Hence, the provincial government proposed to UNHCR to develop an existing site called Nkandji located 17 Km from Kananga.

In addition, **596 people** crossed the border in **Kamako** in Kasai Province, according to DGM. The Government is using churches and schools as a temporary solution to host the returnees.

Inadequate hygiene practices and disease are associated with poor water and sanitation services at the two different entry points. Confirmed family separation cases on site were identified and 35% of the children under 5 years old, were found to be moderately malnourished. The **main needs** are for Shelter, Health, Water and Sanitation, Food, Transport and Protection.

UNHCR’s response

- UNHCR and the Governments of DRC and Angola held a **Tripartite Meeting** on 22 and 23 August, to agree on the legal framework to cover the voluntary and dignified repatriation of the Congolese refugees. In this regard, it was decided to transport voluntary returnees directly to two Transit Centers one in the province of Kasai and one in Kasai Central. They

¹¹ Figure might include expelled Congolese from Angola.

will be able to spend up to 36 hours there, before leaving for their destinations, where they will be assisted by UNHCR and partners. In connection, UNHCR is considering **cash assistance**.

- UNHCR conducted **information campaigns on voluntary repatriation** at Lóvua Settlement before the movements started.
- In both provinces, UNHCR and partners identified sites for **Transit Centers** in the context of the voluntary repatriation and they are proceeding with the rehabilitation to welcome returnees as of **16 September**. UNHCR and partners are also organizing **food distribution** and **measles vaccinations** before returnees come back to the DRC.
- At both entry points in Kamako and Kalamba Mbuji, UNHCR is closely collaborating with national authorities (CNR and DGM) to **verify spontaneous returnees**.
- UNHCR and partners are **monitoring protection incidents** to address special needs and is working with ICRC on **family reunification**, as well as with other partners on **medical care, support to gender-based violence survivors**, etc.
- In the context of spontaneous repatriation, UNHCR has identified **vulnerable returnees**, **174** have already been transported to Kananga by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).
- In Kalamba Mbuji, UNHCR is coordinating the response with **basic life saving measures**. UNHCR and World Food Programme (WFP) distributed **High Energy Biscuits**. UNFPA is also addressing issues related to reproductive health and gender-based violence. Further, UNHCR and partners are implementing **WASH activities**, like water chlorination and are constructing gender segregated latrines and showers.

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